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ABSTRACT

Speech communication plays a significant role in a liberal arts education. Studying and practicing oral communication constitutes direct inquiry into the social and psychological features of social life and survival and presents reality phenomena more directly and emphatically than do writing or other types of communication. Such direct social learning balances the many depersonalized aspects in social life by addressing attention to what people do and create. Anyone involved in public speaking, acting, small group problem solving, interpreting literature orally, or studying speaking disabilities will confront the ways people make, revise, and sometimes destroy social organization. The social goals of liberal education have been described as making students aware of how society functions, the forces shaping its future, and its alternatives and problems. Oral communication is practice in adjusting to, shaping, and creating social systems and being active in social change. Liberal education ought to aid people to see themselves and their surroundings clearly and realistically. Those who study and teach oral communication have ideal opportunities to open young minds to the social and aesthetic criteria that clarify what is relevant and central. (HTH)

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Liberal Education: Speech Communication in the Process and the Product

Carroll C. Arnold

Though I've attended or taught in liberal arts colleges for 45 years, I'm never quite sure what people mean by "liberal education." And I'm loath to say that any given subject must be "illiberal," which I guess I should be able to do if I knew clearly what a "liberal" subject is and isn't. In this quandry I'm most comfortable thinking about the goals--the hoped for products--announced by colleges that call themselves "liberal."

When you look at what educational programs called "liberal" have in common as goals, you generally find claims that all students in these programs are to be equipped with at least the following kinds of knowledge and abilities:

1. The kinds of knowledge and experiences that will prove useful and agreeable no matter what vocation the "completed" student chooses to follow.
2. Basic but still systematic knowledge about at least the following five matters:
   a. the physical phenomena of the universe.
   b. methods of quantifying and measuring.
   c. some ways of aesthetic expression and gratification.
   d. social and political phenomena--how people live in collectivities.
   e. the natures and methods of practical human communication, especially verbal and frequently in more than one language.

Many programs calling themselves "liberal" claim to do more than this, but my experience tells me that you could get that rare thing in a college of liberal arts and sciences--agreement--if you suggested that these were at least among the colleges goals. Therefore I'm going to take this outline

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as a description of the basic "product" of liberal education and consider whether study and practice of speech communication contributes by method, substance, and goals to attainments such as I've just outlined.

Given my history as teacher-scholar in programs of liberal education, you'll not be astonished that I believe study of the spoken word does have an important place within such programs. First, and most directly, speaking is a method of communication that the educated ought to be able to understand as well as practice. Moreover, oral communication is the foundation for literacy in reading and writing. Thus the substance and the method of oral communication, as a study, serve the communicative goals of liberal education directly. But Professor Bradley in his presidential address to this association in 1979 and Professor Gordon F. Hostettler in his 1980 essay "Speech as a Liberal Study II" which appeared in Communication Education have so admirably outlined the dimensions of this contribution that I don't believe I can improve on their recent statements. So instead of rehearsing the content of these excellent expositions, I propose to make a couple of further claims for the study of oral communication.

My first claim is that studying and practicing oral communication constitutes direct inquiry into the social and psychological features of social life and social survival. It seems to me that nowhere in the normal curriculum are creation of social structures and modification of social structures so directly and inescapably presented for students' examination and experimentation.

Speech, listening, and rejoining constitute social reality building in microcosm. One may ask whether this is not also true of writing and other communicative activity. I would answer that oral communication presents the phenomena more directly and emphatically. When a sometime

lover writes a "Dear John" letter to a some-time beloved, the erstwhile lover need not contemplate directly the social and personal world in which the erstwile beloved's tear and choking voice become central facts as the letter is read. But if Abelard must speak directly to Heloise as he tells her they must henceforth be only "friends in the faith," or if Ronald Reagan peers into your home as he asks, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" Abelard faces, and you face, the fact that the immediate world has been reconstituted by force of speech, listening, and response. To encounter "facts of life" through active speech, listening, and rejoinder is to become personally immersed in the primary stuff of social realities. To participate in social change directly is learn the roles of people in social forces and institutions.

I suggest that such direct social learning can at least balance the perceptual scale against the many depersonalizing conceptions of social life that assail the modern student. Consider the array of academic conceptualizations and idioms that portray social life as fundamentally the product of depersonalized "inputs" and "outputs." Or consider the semiologists' penchant for depersonalizing even human communication by their concern to treat all symbolic creations of human minds as but "texts." Or consider the kind of historicism that Gertrude Himmelfarb calls "the impulse to drown the self in the irresistible tide of history, to deny commonsense reason and freedom in the name of a higher, Hegelian, hypostatized Reason and Freedom." These and more often justifiable points of view, do diminish the apparent roles of individuals in societies. But any contemplation of oral communication, which is always situated in some describable, personalized circumstance, readdresses attention to what people do and create. Let me cite three examples.

It is worth noticing that it was precisely a refocusing on processes of oral communication that led a number of contemporary linguists, anthropologists, and philosophers to insist that there is a distinction between rule-governed "linguistic competence" and situationally adaptive "communicative competence." And in the humanities it has been reconstruction of what an "oral culture" must be that has produced recent, richer interpretations of classical Greek history, literature, and philosophy. In both cases penetrating the processes of communication that is oral taught scholars something fresh about how communicative choices construct social relations. But such choices construct social institutions, too.

In a monograph soon to be published Phillip Tompkins, a specialist in organizational communication, has surveyed nearly a century's research and theory concerning the nature of organizations in Western societies. His survey leads him to the conclusion that what we, after the fact, call an "organization" is the product of individuals' communication about what the rules of association are to be. "Organization" does not contain human communicative action, Tompkins maintains; at any given moment an "organization" is the outcome of ongoing human interactions concerning norms of association and negotiation with other groups of human beings. Tompkins' study is one instance among a good many that illustrate how close attention to communicative processes--so fundamentally illustrated in oral communication--restores vitality and humanism to otherwise drab, dehumanized, static conceptions of human association.

Direct study of oral communication restores the processual character of social relations to view. Any person thoughtfully engaged in public speaking, acting, small-group problem solving, interpreting literature orally, or studying disabilities in speaking will by the very nature of that study and practice be brought face-to-face with the fundamental ways people make and revise and sometimes destroy social organization.

Several years ago Sidney Hook described the social goals of liberal education in these words: "Every student has a need to become intelligently aware of how his society functions, of the historical, economic, and social forces shaping its future, of the alternatives of development still open to us, of the problems, predicaments, and programs he and his fellow citizens must face." I don't claim that study of oral communication provides the only or a complete avenue to this kind of awareness, but I do insist that systematic study of oral communication has the unique and salutary effect of dramatically re-personalizing a student's image of social action and of alternatives people have when they associate with one another. Disciplined practice of oral communication is in itself "laboratory" practice in adjusting to, shaping, and creating social systems; in speaking every student is necessarily active in social change, or that student suffers the penalties of his or her misreadings of life-as-we-live-it-together. If liberal education aims at the kinds of social knowledge Hook described, liberal education must use the teaching laboratory of studies in oral communication, create a better laboratory-of-social-experimentation, or confess that by its definitions direct experience is no part of becoming "intelligently aware of how ... society functions."

Having made a claim that is not frequently even discussed, let me now turn to a problem in contemporary education about which I think study of oral communication can do something but has done too little. The problem is that in these days, even in science, claims of certainty are moot. A result is that to many of our students all seems relative or all seems a matter of simple faith.

During the past four years I have taught for periods from a month to a semester at six universities, two each in the East, the Midlands, and the far West of this country. In each place I have encountered among undergraduate and graduate students the logical-positivist myths that ideally our judgments and observations ought to be value-free because in the realm of values there can scarcely be anchors more secure than individual preference. Now of all the standard studies in the curricula of liberal education it strikes me that in literature, philosophy, and oral composition it is easiest and most natural to make the points that human communication is never value-free and that though our valuings can never be validated in any mathematical sense, they are not without discussable, examinable justifications. [redacted] What the humanities ought to be showing students was expertly expressed in two sentences by the distinguished literary critic, M. H. Abrams, when he said:

> The reasoning and conclusions of humanistic discourse are subject to criteria, but these are criteria appropriate to its own intellectual enterprise, such as coherent or incoherent, inclusive or omissive, sensible or outré, disinterested or partisan, central or overly ingenious, clear or obfuscative, sound or unsound. ... Differences permit individual inquirers by diversely coherent and rational procedures, to produce sound but divergent conclusions about the matter at hand, whether it is Hamlet or the Poetics or the French Revolution or the nature of justice.

Abrams expresses the rationality and aim of this humanistic logic in this way: "What each perspective does ... is to bring out different aspects of a subject, to locate it in a different context or relevant considerations, and to force us to see it in a way we have not seen it before."

That the "logics" of differing enterprises differ ought to be a lesson of all liberal education. Whether the lesson is taught by our philosophers and literary scholars I'll not try to judge. That the lesson can, ought to be, but is not yet fully taught by curricula in oral communication is my immediate concern.

One of the last things our late friend Douglas Ehninger wrote was a survey of theories of how valuing in practical communication occurs and can be judged. The essay, soon to be published, was written in collaboration with my Penn State colleague, Gerard A. Hauser. In concluding their essay Ehninger and Hau ser said this:

> Contemporary thinking concerning the functions and importance of values and value judgments in communication is best described as "work in progress." [But] translating post-positivist communicational and rhetorical theory from seminar to instruction in speech and writing has hardly begun. Despite growing numbers of assertions to the contrary, textbooks and syllabi continue to assert or imply that it is both possible and desirable to practice value-free discourse.

It is surely obvious that the matters about which people <u>talk</u> most are problematic matters concerning which alternative "logics" of valuing may be argued for. Whatever philosophers and literary scholars have to teach about valuing, the pervasive necessity of weighing alternative values is illustrated in all <u>oral</u> communication, persuasive, interpretive, dramatistic, or diagnostic.

It appears to me that by adopting our original, rhetorical premises those of us who study and teach oral communication have ideal opportunities to open young minds to the social and aesthetic criteria that clarify what is relevant, coherent, inclusive, disinterested,

central, clear, and hence "sound." All of these characterizations are perceptual judgments that arise in the mind in consequence of rhetorical and aesthetic configurations of communicated stimuli. A line of rhetorical thinkers beginning with Gorgias and running through Aristotle, Cicero, Francis Bacon, George Campbell, Richard Whately, James Winans, Craig Baird, Douglas Ehninger, Chaim Perelman, and Robert Scott--to name but a few--has repeatedly reminded us that viable, if not certain, conclusions are possible if practically reasoned in anticipation of open discussion and dialogue with those invited to accept them. The talk of our lives is, once more, the very "laboratory" for exploration of the social pertinence and practicality of conclusions; and if and when instruction in oral communication takes full advantage of that fact it can greatly contribute to students' intelligent understanding of reasonable but uncertain valuing.

Intensive study and practice of speaking produces citizens who are more literate and more versatile than counterparts without such experience. On this we have empirical as well as philosophical evidence. I suggest, further, that experience in oral communication teaches directly and immediately the maleability of social organization. These are significant products of systematic study of humanity's powers of speech. But a lesson that study of speech could teach especially well is the lesson that in the many circumstances where certain judgments are not possible, the testing processes of communication and response are the only validating processes we have, and there the measures are measures of coherence, inclusiveness, reasonableness, disinterestedness, centrality, and clarity. For these tests, applied in dialogue, are the only tests of "soundness" that we have when demonstration is not possible.

Liberal education, I believe, ought to aid people to see themselves and their surroundings clearly and realistically. I have hoped to show that beyond contributions to understanding of communication itself, study

of oral communication makes salient the social significance of human actions and interactions and, at least potentially, clarifies the nature of reasonableness in realms of probability and conjecture.